WHO ARE THE MENNONITES?

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"I won't let you get me down until I see a Mennonite," a lady insisted a few years ago during a flood when a Mennonite Disaster Service team tried to rescue her from a tree. Perhaps you have also wondered who the Mennonites are and what makes their churches distinctive from other churches.

Mennonite groups had their beginning during the sixteenth-century Reformation time. A small group of Swiss Brethren led by Conrad Grebel, Felix Manz, and George Blaurock felt that the existing church did not meet God's standards and the needs of the people. They wanted to go further than other reformers did. They argued for a free church, one not established by and connected with the government. They believed that all persons should voluntarily choose whether or not they wished to join a church—ideas which were considered revolutionary at that time.

These early Swiss Brethren, later called Anabaptists, practiced adult believers' baptism instead of infant baptism. Those who voluntarily joined their group were expected to live a life of discipleship, committing themselves to obey the words of Christ (Mt. 18:15-22). The Bible was their guide and source book for their conduct. They also believed that their relationships to others were to be governed by love and truth. For them, fighting and killing were contrary to the law of love, by which they felt the Bible taught they must live.

Both the recognized church and state of that time joined hands to destroy this new Christian movement which dared to teach separation of church and state, believers' baptism, and the way of the cross in unjust suffering. Despite the martyrdom of over five thousand members within a few generations after its beginning, Anabaptism quickly spread throughout Swit-

zerland, South Germany, and into the Netherlands and France. Using the Bible as their guide and norm, these early Anabaptists took seriously Christ's command to go into the world to witness to all people everywhere, even across national boundaries. Those who voluntarily accepted the gospel were baptized and received into the church.

The person who did the most for the early Anabaptists was a man named Menno Simons. After his conversion in 1536 in Witmarsum, he went around northwestern Europe encouraging and strengthening these persecuted people by preaching and writing tracts to defend their faith and way of life. Because Menno Simons was such an outstanding leader, the Anabaptists came to be called Mennonites. They are still known by that name today.

Persecution and hardship continued to scatter the increasing number of Mennonites across Europe and into the New World. While some trekked across Europe into Russia at the invitation of Catherine the Great in 1789, others were migrating from Europe to America. All were looking for a place where they could establish homes and churches and practice their Christian faith as they believed.

The migration of Mennonites from one nation to another and from one continent to another has continued through the more than 450 years of their history. From 1683 Mennonites continued to come to America in large numbers, ever moving westward with the frontier. In the late nineteenth century over twenty thousand Russian Mennonites immigrated to the United States and Canada, helping to make the midwest section of the North American continent the breadbasket of the world with their Turkey Red winter wheat. Prior to and after World War II, many European Mennonites found new homes in Paraguay, Brazil, Canada, and the United States. Even today some Mennonites from Russia are finding new homes in Germany. Mennonites in more prosperous countries have always been instrumental in helping oppressed Mennonites in other areas find new homes.

While Mennonites have migrated to frontier lands to be true to their faith, it is true that many Mennonites at various times and places have grown rich and become insensitive to God and His leading. While Mennonites have sought to represent Christ's kingdom in the world, they have also at times lost sight of what Christ's kingdom really is and how being part of it determines actions toward others.

Present-day Mennonites are scattered all over the world. There are over 500,000 persons who identify themselves with the Christian faith as practiced by the Mennonites. They are divided into different groups because of their beliefs, church practices, or national and cultural backgrounds. However, there is a common biblical Mennonite faith which unites them around the world.

CHARACTERISTICS OF MENNONITE FAITH

A believers' faith. The outstanding characteristic of Mennonite groups continues to be today, as it was in its beginning, a voluntary church made up of believers who have placed their faith and trust in Jesus Christ. Only those who are old enough to decide carefully and prayerfully that Jesus Christ is their Savior and Lord are baptized and received into membership in a Mennonite church. This is called believers' baptism.

A living faith. Even though the Mennonites have voluntary membership, they are a disciplined community. Mennonites believe that those who sincerely desire to be part of the church will live out their faith daily in a way that will set them apart from those who do not profess Christ as Lord. Therefore, the Mennonites believe that the church is a people not a building, and that members of the church are identifiable by their life-style and connection with the peoplehood of Jesus Christ.

A caring faith. The early Anabaptists looked upon their fellowship as the body of Christ.

They felt that the only way people could find fellowship was in caring for each other both physically and spiritually. With Christ as Lord of their lives, Mennonites still feel it is possible to share their material possessions with each other, particularly with those in need. This interdependence of persons within the church gives life and salvation a new meaning, making real community possible.

A sharing faith. Because those who are joined together in Mennonite churches have experienced love and forgiveness from God and each other, they seek to be a community which will draw those who are not Christians into a fellowship in which they also can experience love and forgiveness with God and others. Mennonites take the Great Commission of Jesus (Mt. 28:19, 20) seriously, actively seeking to make disciples among all nations and races. Mission programs which minister both to the spriritual and physical needs of people are a dynamic part of Mennonite groups. Mission work is carried on all over the world.

A serving faith. Members of the Mennonite churches, believing that faith and action are inseparable, bond together to serve the needy in the name of Christ. The Mennonite Central Committee, which is made up of many Mennonite denominations and the Brethren in Christ, does many acts of service for a needy world. Their work includes programs to feed the hungry and help the hungry to feed themselves, rehabilitation of refugees, and disaster service in areas flooded or shattered by storms. It is an crganization known both nationally and internationally. Since its founding in 1920, thousands of people, most of them volunteers, have served under its auspices. In addition, millions of dollars are being contributed every year to aid needy people all over the world.

A loving faith. As Christians who take the teachings of the Bible seriously, Mennonites seek to practice the way of love. Through his life Jesus taught that persons should not only help their friends and neighbors, but also their enemies. Mennonites seek to practice this by helping people and nations to find peaceful resolutions to their problems rather than to go to war. During wartime many Mennonites have voluntarily chosen alternative service instead of military service. But voluntary service is also a vital part of the peacetime witness of Mennonites.

AN INVITATION FOR YOU

Now that we have introduced the Mennonites and what they believe Christ wants the church and his disciples to be, we would like to invite you to acquaint yourself further with us and let us become acquainted with you as we seek to serve Christ together.

—*La Vernae Dick*

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